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(The) Future of Comparative Literary Studies*

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The intellect acquires critical acumen by familiarity with different traditions. How much does one really understand by merely following one's own reasoning only?

Bhartrhari

Everywhere there is connection, everywhere there is illustration. No single event, no single literature is adequately comprehended except in relation to other events, to other literature.

Matthew Arnold

I

The future is often a subject of critical concern when the past and present are either too stable or too volatile, for the future in a way is an extension of experienced state constituted by present and past. In the case of comparative literature, the future has been a subject of concerns, for the initial euphoria, after its proposition by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Abel Francois Villemain, and Matthew Arnold by the mid-1850s after its brief history of six decades, was replaced by questioning of the very nomenclature, nature and functions of Comparative Literature. Its past has been turbulent and present so fluid, so the exercise in anticipating its future is more in terms of its existence, about to be, in consonance with the etymological associations of the root of the word 'future' in Latin *futurus* i.e. 'to be'. Keeping it in view, the use of article 'the' before the future of Comparative Literature is a risky phenomenon because when its past and present have been uncertain, how can its future be definitive. Moreover, Comparative Literature exists only because practitioners of comparative literature pursue it, and most of those who have questioned it have not been its enemies but not its great practitioners either.

Among the questioners of Comparative Literature Benedetto Croce in 1903 questioned Comparative Literature as a separate discipline and dismissed it as a non subject. He rejected the definition of Comparative Literature as the exploration of the vicissitudes, alterations, developments and reciprocal differences of themes

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and literary ideas across literatures, and added that there is no study more arid than researches of this sort. He classified the kind of works done under the rubric of Comparative Literature, 'in the category of erudition purely and simple'. (215 – 23)

Croce found no substance in Comparative Literature, for the term was obfuscatory on the ground that the true object of study was literary history, and he did not see any distinction between pure and simple literary history and comparative literary history. ¹

In the 1920's Lane Cooper called the term Comparative Literature a 'bogus term', one that makes 'neither sense nor syntax', and added, "You might as well permit yourself to say "comparative potatoes" or "comparative husks." (Cooper in Wellek 1970:4) Comparative Literature further suffered between the two World Wars because of ascendancy of New Criticism that proposed autonomy of text and autotelic nature of its 'close' study in isolation. New Criticism takes no note of the existence of other texts. If a text is autonomous with no relationship with other texts, the very possibility of existence of comparison is ruled out, for comparison needs at least two texts. Among New critics, T.S Eliot was a major exception as he, through his concept of tradition, proposed continuity of tradition in his essay entitled "Tradition and Individual Talent", for the function of tradition is to compare and contrast and find out the ways and works in which tradition operates.

After the New Critics, Northrop Frye in the second half of the 1940s and later in 1950s saw continuity of literature in terms of 'myth' (*mythos*) as an epicentral structure. He saw literature not as a heap of works but inter-connected by the structural principle of the myths of Quest and Hero that appear in divergent forms in different works in different period. Frye's myth criticism that might be called quasi-structuralism departed radically from New Criticism, and in a way loosened the monistic rigidity of Textual Criticism and thereby gave a new impetus, though theoretically, to comparative pursuits. However, with the rise of Structuralism and Post Structuralism and its offshoots in the form of feminism, Post-colonialism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis and sweep of theory as a separate discipline shifted attention from comparison of text to critical and theoretical formulations, though in the third quarter there had been a spurt in comparing activities. During this period there was greater emphasis on discussion on theoretical aspects of Comparative Literature, though there were questions raised against its methodology.

René Wellek, writing in *Comparative Literature*, critiqued prevailing comparative literature research and spoke against "an artificial demarcation of subject matter and methodology, a mechanistic concept of sources and influences (and) a motivation of cultural nationalism, however generous". (Wellek 1963: 282-295). Later in an article "Comparative Literature Today", he discussed development of Comparative Literature as a

discipline in Europe (including Russia) and the U.S.A. since the 1920s. He brought out the importance to the humanities of a *literary* approach to literature and of combination of history and criticism. (In *Comparative Literature*, 17:1965, 325-37. Emphasis mine) Paul Van Tieghem's distinction between 'comparative' literature, 'general' literature and 'world' literature did not convince René Wellek, and he stated:

It is impossible to draw a line between Comparative Literature and general literature, between, say, the influence of Walter Scott in France and the rise of the historical novel. Besides, the term 'general literature' lends itself confusion; it has been understood to mean literary theory, poetics, and the principles of literature. (Wellek 1970: 17)

He further stated that Comparative Literature in the restricted sense of the binary relations can not make a meaningful discipline because it would involve dealing with fragments and could have no methodology of its own. In *Theory of Literature*, written along with Warren Austin, stressed the point made earlier by Wellek, and stated that one of the results of the narrow binary approach has been a decline in interest in comparative literature. In his talk entitled "The Crisis of Comparative Literature" delivered in 1959, he further questioned the obsolete and partisan methodology. He added that Comparative Literature had not established itself properly as a subject on any serious basis. He further complained that Comparative Literature was trying to grapple with the issues that have become redundant, and blamed the French School of Comparative Literature for the problems in "The Crisis of Comparative Literature":

All these floundering are only possible because Van Tieghem, his precursors and followers conceive of literary study in terms of nineteenth century positivistic influences... They have accumulated an enormous mass of parallels, similarities and sometimes identities, but they have rarely asked what these relationships are supposed to show except possibly the fact of one writer's knowledge and reading of another writer. (Wellek 1963: 282-96)

Other debates on ancillary aspects also continued between comparatists of different nationalities as Simon Jeune considered 'influence' study as the core of Comparative Literature. (Jeune 39) On the other hand, Wellek debunked the study of literary relations and influences as tainted by 'an unreflecting positivism.' The surfeit of discussion of theoretical aspects of Comparative Literature led to ignorance of practice of Comparative Literature, the most essential aspect, to such an extent that a critic like Harry Levin complained in 1969: "We spend far too much of our energy talking ... about Comparative Literature and not enough of it comparing the literature." (Levin: 74-90)

The words of Levin still hold good for the future of Comparative Literature, for the practice, not mere talk about it, would sustain and lead to prosperity of Comparative Literature whatever its form might be.

II

By considering development of Comparative Literature in terms of its Schools, it is possible not only to comprehend its past but also to anticipate its future on the basis of the developments in the past.

Influence/reception, analogy, thematology, genology, 'placing', historiography and translation have been some of the main concerns of Comparative Literature. These concerns have defined the character of various schools. Almost by the end of the 19th century the central concern of the German school was thematics with stress on *zeitgeist* and on racial and ethnic roots. The French school focused on influence/reception with its basis on positivism. The British/English School specialized in 'placing' in which 'placing' of texts leads to mutual illumination of texts.² The American School of comparative literature questioned the dominance of the French school and its principal practice in the post-World War II period with focus on interdisciplinary approach. It opened the scope of comparative literature through Henry Remak and René Wellek. Remak in his essay summed up trends and practices of comparatists in the United States of America, and in the process provided manifesto of the American School:

Comparative Literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand, and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts (e.g. painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences (e.g. politics, economics, sociology), the sciences, religion, etc., on the other. In brief, it is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression. (3)

H. Remak founded the American school of comparative literature and also of its distinction from the French school. While the French school concerned itself with 'product', the American School emphasised on the 'process' of the 'product' coming into existence. Moreover, it opened up the frontiers of Comparative Literature and transgressed boundaries of the discipline. He presented an alternative model of comparative literature by critiquing what he termed 'unimaginative positivistic approach' and stated:

In a good many influence studies, the location of sources has been given too much attention, rather than such questions as: what was retained and what was rejected, and why, and how was material absorbed and integrated, and with what success? If conducted in this fashion, influence studies contribute not only to our knowledge of literary history but to our understanding of the creative process and of the literary work of art. (Remak 3)

Another contribution that Remak made was 'depoliticization' of comparative literature by clearing free from the controversy pertaining to the issue of nationalism. Instead of 'nation' he uses a relatively neutral term

‘country’, for the former is ideological and the latter, geographical. This was in consonance with the tradition already existing in the American endeavors in the declining decades of the 19th century. For instance, Charles Mills Gayley, who in the 1890s founded comparative literature at Berkley, sowed early seeds of the American school. He considered Comparative Literature nothing more or less than literary philology and stressed the significance of psychology, anthropology, linguistics, social sciences, religion and art in the literary study. By considering literature as a network of related subjects, in a way he paved the path for interdisciplinary studies in the domain of comparative literature. (Gayley 56-68)

The European or Western model of Comparative Literature emphasizes on similarities rather than dissimilarities, though binary model of Comparative Literature considers different literatures (e.g. French or Italian, or the English, Irish, Scottish or Welsh with the rubric of English literature) of European or Western Comparative Literature as different on geographical, linguistic, historic, cultural and aesthetic lines. Here it has to be borne in mind that geographical and psychological distances change the very perception of a category like the European Literature for the Indian Comparative Literature, thrust under the umbrella term of the non-European model of comparative literature, is most likely to have a different agenda, as it would prefer similarities/analogy based Comparative literature to binary Comparative Literature. The brief discussion of schools of Comparative Literature offers a few lessons: (i) Comparative Literature is in a state of evolution, and its orientations have changed with different schools. While the American school by reacting against the French school freed it from the limitations of positivism and excessive insistence on influence/reception and introduced interdisciplinary, it brought with it a historicity; (ii) It is time for us to reject the homogenizing categories like the non-European model or Third World model of Comparative Literature with insistence on the study of identity or specificity— 6 cultural identity, literary canons, periodization, literary history and (inter)cultural influence; and (iii) there is a need to understand the changes that time and location and attitudes bring about in our perception of different schools of comparative literature.

A fresh whiff of air was wafted into Comparative Literature by the non-Western comparative literary scholars particularly from Africa. For instance, they question the term ‘universal’, so dear to the Western comparatists. Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian novelist and critic, pronounced that the term was used as “a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe.” (Achebe 1975: 9) Following the example of Achebe, Chidi Amuta questioned the Western comparatists’ study of European ‘influence’ on African writers. He considers the ‘quest’ for influences as “one of the ruses in the trick bag” of those critics who see European culture as having had a civilizing impact on ‘primitive’ African writing. (Amuta 19)

Indian literature has always been multilingual and multi-literary and, so, comparative without having any definite methodology.³ The Comparative Indian literature after the western school has been the model for the

Indian scholars like Sisir Kumar Das, Amiya Dev and Swapan Majumdar. In fact, for some reasons no strong need for an Indian school or even methodology has been felt. For reasons typically Indian, there has been Indian Comparative Literature Association, but there has been no concentrated speculation or execution in the direction of proposing and establishing Indian School of Comparative Literature or Indian Comparative Literature—sometimes apologetically, and sometimes with the optimism that practice and pursuits of Indian comparatists would lead to the establishment of Indian school of Comparative Literature. Whatever be the reasons for it, the fact is that even after almost five decades of existence of the Jadavpur School of Comparative Literature, save the establishment of Chairs in different Universities and stray efforts of amateur and professional comparatists, there is no unambiguous Indian School of Comparative Literature. Admittedly, the proposition of an Indian School of Comparative Literature should not be directed merely at satisfying ego with the anxiety of identity. A school needs a group of scholars with broad agreement on the agenda and the manifesto with adherence and subscription to its basic tenets for considerable period of time by sizeable number of followers. Moreover, it demands consistent and diverse practice. However, endeavours in the direction of seeking a school helps in knowing the basic tenets and weaknesses of one's own practices.

The pursuits of Indian comparatists contain in them outlines of Indian Comparative Literature. For instance, Sisir Kumar Das in his *History of Indian Literature* forwards a model of Indian literary historiography. He stresses the significance of tradition as the core concern of literary pursuits in India, and thereby suggested that its study should form an integral part of comparative pursuits in India. Moreover, he not only insisted but also showed with his work *A History of Indian Literature* (1991) that (a) literary history of Indian literature should be written by following Indian models. His younger contemporary Swapana Majumdar speaks of the 'specificity of national literatures in the non-European/American comparative literature from the Third World: "It is because of this predilection for National Literature that Comparative Literature has struck roots in the Third World nations and India in particular." (Majumdar 1987: 53) By stating this Majumdar gives a new Indian dimension to national literature. He adds a new and radical perspective to comparative literature that can be put in the Indian School of Comparative literature, though it might be put in the larger category of the Third World Comparative Literature.⁴

The basic purpose behind discussing these traits of Indian Comparative Literature is aimed at finding the essential attributes that form the foundation of Indian literature on which the potential Indian Comparative Literature can be based. Moreover, the future of Comparative Literature would to a good extent depend on recognition and study of various literatures other than major literatures, different schools, like Indian Comparative Literature, their literary and cultural traditions, ethos and specificities in different parts of the

world. Moreover, the future of comparative literature would be to a good measure be dependant on the relationship between these literatures/schools and its ability to respond to developments in other disciplines.

III

The future of Comparative Literature is to be seen in the light of social and contextual norms intrinsic to it. Comparative Literature, though it might appear as a tall claim, had to adapt itself to the demands and challenges of humanity/ literature, human/ literary values, and changes attendant to them. It originated out of the impending alienation between different insulating units of humanity i.e. nations with one race, religion, region, language and literature (even caste and creed). One of the basic functions of literature is to delineate society, whereas 'national' literature alienated one part of humanity from the other and thereby frustrated the basic purpose of literature. Hence, various terms used in relation to Comparative Literature such as 'General Literature', 'World Literature', 'National Literature', however vague they might still be, tried to address the issue of fighting alienating effect of National Literature since the last decade of the 18th century onwards.

In the 20th century, Comparative Literature witnessed an enlargement of its scope primarily through Henry Remak in its first half; later its questioning of its methodology by René Wellek, as discussed earlier, and of its very existence in the wake of spree of translation activities in terms of theory and practice thorough Susan Bassnett who announced the "death of Comparative Literature" in one sense fortunately for the practioners of Comparative Literature, oneself included⁵. With the emergence of cultural studies and multiculturalism in the wake of globalization and the shrinking of the globe in a village⁶ in the 1960s, Comparative Literature had to adapt to new demands made on it. Three Reports – the Levin Report, 1965, the Green Report, 1975 and the Bernheimer Report, 1993 submitted to the American Comparative Literature Association took note of these developments and the way(s) in which Comparative Literature can respond to them.

Mary Louise Pratt in "Comparative Literature and Global Citizenship" sees merit in multilingual discipline in an age of globalization and asked comparatists to desist from thinking of non-English languages as "foreign" languages. (58-67) In a way, she suggests non-Anglo-centric model of Comparative Literature but there is nothing new in her insistence on multilingualism and multiculturalism, for multilingualism and multiculturalism are inter-related and multilingualism has always been an integral constitutive elements of Comparative Literature. However, there is a difference between multiculturalism and Comparative Literature in their attitudes towards texts. According to Tobin Siebers:

Multiculturalism is, of course, more text bound than Comparative Literature as prerequisites to its study; it requires only that kind of texts that exert a symbolic presence in the classroom, which means

that it enjoys a more accessible pedagogy. But access and openness are what both dreams value. (Siebers in Bernheimer 197)

As regards the relation of Comparative Literature with 'Cultural Studies', it has to be noted that on the surface, both of them seem to have no major problem, for if multiculturalism is a constitutive factor of Comparative Literature, cultural studies should be a part of Comparative Literature. However, comparatists accuse cultural studies of tending to be empiricist and monolingual, something that comparatists try to confront and get rid of.⁷

The Bernheimer Report notes that Comparative Literature is still conscious and ambitious of its ethical role. In the process it would be able to produce what Mary Louise Pratt calls 'bicultural' and 'multilingual people' in the age in which multiculturalism is a slogan. The advocates of this vision of Comparative Literature speak of new kinds of citizens of a new world order as Pratt's 'global citizens', the Levin and Bernheimer Reports' 'cultural pluralists', the Levin and Green Reports' 'internationalists' and the Green Report's 'cosmopolitans'. Terming Comparative Literature as 'a symbolic United Nations' (Siebers 196), Siebers states that "...Comparative Literature as a discipline is dying. The irony is that it is being wrecked by its own success, and this is a difficult irony to understand." (Idem.) The Levin and Bernheimer Reports see lack of resources for the inability of Comparative Literature in fulfilling its vision. Hence, it is becoming increasingly difficult for Comparative Literature to compete with multiculturalism:

...Comparative Literature was an early advocate of a worldview that has found a new and more popular formulation in multiculturalism. In the cola wars between Comparative Literature and multiculturalism, the old brand cannot stand up to the new one, no matter how similar they are, because multiculturalism has found a marketing strategy that makes it available to more people. Comparatists are losing their identity in the university because everyone is becoming comparatists of a kind. (196)

There is the future of a particular kind of Comparative Literature and arriving at certain goals fixed by it in response to challenges faced by it from time to time, posed by developments from within and in allied disciplines.

To conclude let me take recourse to Walter Benjamin. While speaking of typology of literature, he remarked that literature is of two types – the directive. (*die weisende*) and the touching (*die beruhrende*). Marcel Proust (1871-1922) is an instance of the first, and Charles Peguy (1873-1915), the French poet and publicist, of the second. The former points to, explains, analyses things with depth, or rather intensity always on his side,

never on that of his partner. The latter is interested in moving closer to readers, getting together converting or collaborating with readers. Benjamin remarks:

There has never been anyone else with Proust's ability to show us things; Proust's pointing finger is unequalled. But there is another gesture in amicable togetherness in conversation: physical contact. To no one is this gesture more alien than to Proust. He cannot touch his reader either; he could not do so for anything in the world. If one wanted to group literature around these poles, dividing it into the directive and the touching kind, the core of the former would be the work of Proust, the core of the latter, the work of Peguy. (207)

By using Benjamin's terms to the domain of comparative literature for our present purpose it can be argued that the aim of one kind of comparative literature is to exemplify, and embody some kind of comparative literary activity without striving to produce impact of doctrines. The other kind is touching mode in which Comparative Literature seeks the assent and identification with it. Such a pursuer can be put in the category of systematic/ systematizing Comparative Literature. The practitioners of Comparative Literature of this kind are codifiers, though the quality may vary according to period, practitioner and situation. Such practitioners of Comparative Literature are 'touchers'. It is notable here that the most of eminent systematizers of Comparative Literature have been 'touchers'. They study literature comparatively and see the abstract structures operating in contexts and by systematizing them they want to access literature in a certain way, that is, the way they (its practitioners) have to offer. The future of Comparative Literature would depend on the combined endeavours of both kinds of pursuers of literatures—those who can 'show' and those who can 'touch' in the already pursued old areas and also the new ones like translation, multiculturalism, cultural studies, inter-cultural studies, folklore and oral literary studies that have earned the attention of interdisciplinary comparatists in the Euro-American and different non-European schools of Comparative Literature. The future of Comparative Literature to a considerable extent depends on its ability to become the 'true' United Nations of literatures of world and different disciplines of knowledge, without discrimination among its members as permanent (super-) members with veto power and non-permanent ordinary members who are at the mercy of their super powers.

NOTES

1. B. Croce objected to the term 'Comparative Literature', for he considered the proper object of study should be literary history:

...the comparative history of literature is history understood in its true sense as a complete explanation for the literary work, encompassed in all its relationships, disposed in the composite whole of universal literary

history, (where else could it ever be placed?), seen in these connections and preparations that are its raison d'être. (Croce 333)

Later Charles Mills Gayley also complained about the term 'comparative literature', as he found it too slippery and misleading. (Gayley in Schultz and Rhein102). However, he could not find any alternative term, as Praver did after seven decades. Referring to Lane Cooper's objections to the term comparative literature, S.S. Praver agreed with him, as discussed in the present paper, preferred what he calls "clumsier but more accurate description 'the comparative study of literature'". (Praver 1973: 2) Ironically, convenience prevails over 'political correction', as he says, "though I will occasionally, for the sake of brevity, use the more established term." (Idem.)

2. The concept of 'placing', the most significant contribution of British comparative literature, according to S. S. Praver, juxtaposes texts in order to create a new meaning across cultures and leads to "the mutual illumination of several texts, or series of texts, considered side by side; the greater understanding we derive from juxtaposing a number of (frequently very different) works, authors and literary traditions." (Praver 102)

3. Maurice Winternitz saw the inherent multiplicity of Indian literature in its history. Speaking about it he had remarked, as has been cited by Sirir Kumar Das in *A History of Indian Literature* Vol. I:

The history of Indian literature in the most comprehensive sense of the word is the history of a literature, which not only stretches across great periods of time and an enormous area, but also one which is composed in many languages.

4. The Third World as a category lost its relevance in the 1980s after the end of the USSR, though some of the Indian literary critics and social scientists persisted with it. For discussion of the term, its history and consequent redundancy please see my paper "Knowledge, Globalization and Third World" in *Vāk* Vol. 1. Ed. Avadhesh Kumar Singh (Rajkot: Saurashtra University Press, 2006).

5. It would be congruous to quote Bassnett's views regarding the present state of Comparative Literature here: Comparative literature as a discipline has had its day. Cross cultural work in women's studies, in post-colonial theory, in cultural studies has changed the face of literary studies generally. We should look upon translation studies as the principal discipline from now on, with comparative literature as a valued but subsidiary subject area. (Bassnett 1991: 161)

6. The term 'global village' was coined by the prominent media thinker Marshal Mc Luhan in the 1960s to articulate his belief that electronic communication would unite the world. The advent of the Internet over the

last a decades has paralleled the emergence of the concept of globalization and shrinking of the world in an unprecedented manner.

7. Leave aside the discipline of Comparative Literature, even for the scholars of cultural studies has been a problematic subject to define. Richard Johnson has commented on it:

Even now, distinctively 'literary' and distinctively 'sociological' approaches are developing, closely related to theoretical fragmentations. This would not matter if one discipline or one problematic could grasp the study of culture as a whole, but this is not, in my opinion, the case. Cultural processes do not correspond to the contours of academic knowledge as they stand. Cultural studies must be interdisciplinary or a-disciplinary in its tendencies...we need a special kind of defining activity...not definition in the sense of an academic codification of cultural studies...but some pointers to further transformations. (Johnson 1986: 277- 314)

According to Johnson the main areas of research in cultural studies include (i) the study of the processes of cultural production, (ii) text-based approaches which focus on the cultural products themselves, and (iii) research into lived cultures, which 'has been closely associated with a politics of representation'.(Ibid.) All these details and limitations of a discipline notwithstanding, we must take note of the fact that there are more similarities than differences between Comparative Literature in the 19th century and cultural studies in the 1990s, for the then comparatists were concerned with the issues of roots/origins, with traditions and literary canons and assertion of national consciousness. These characteristics match, to a considerable extent, with the interdisciplinary nature of cultural studies, as it strives to study the concepts of culture, language, nation, history, and identity that change rapidly in an ever changing world.

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